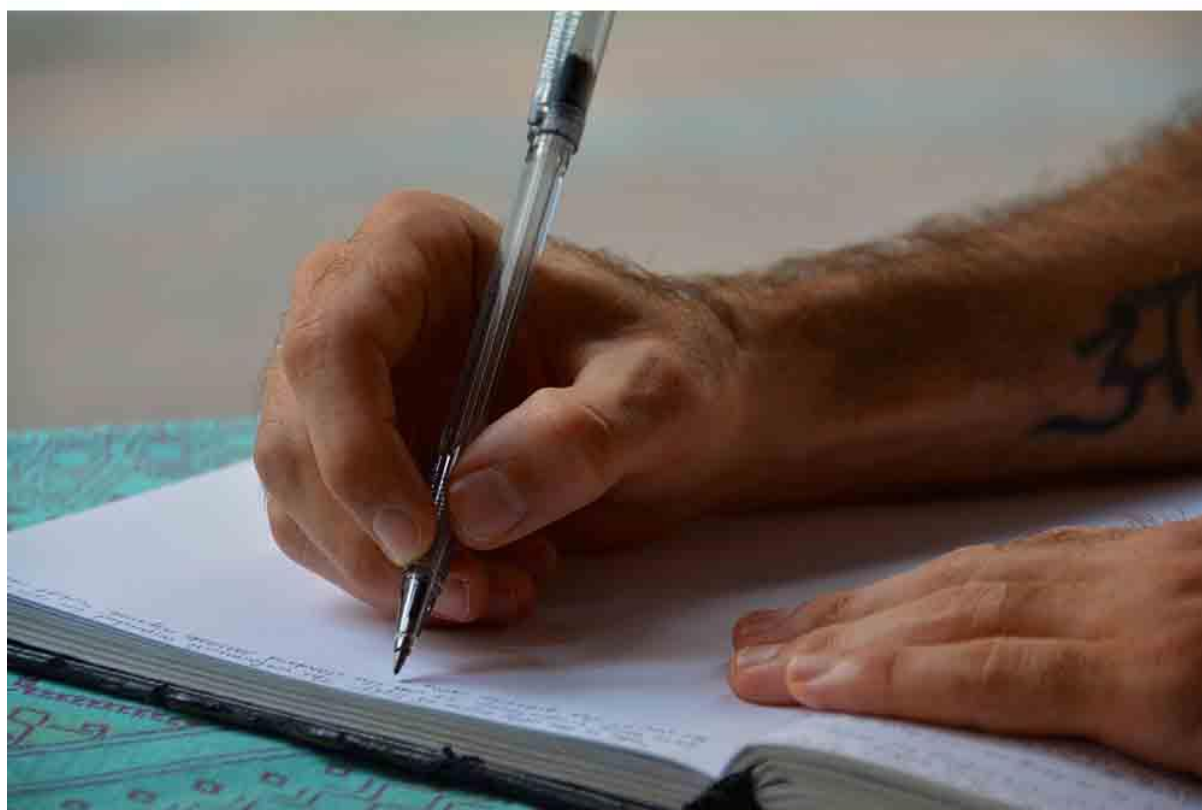


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Demystifying and Deconstructing the Feminist Thought in Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables*

Abstract

Centuries of systematic regression has stalled and stunted the growth of what could have been a glorious species, but women have resisted the vicious cycle of patriarchy through art and the artist.

Namjoshi rummages through the impressionable stories of fanciful nature that has sugar – coated the basest laws of society, to divulge the ravaged beauties within. This paper aims to analyze the strain of feminist thought, reflective of Namjoshi's style in assessing and deconstructing the wrongful representation of female characters that have existed in the fables of the world. The stories are taken from various sources – Aesop's Fables, Panchatantra, Greek Myths, Christian Myths, Anderson's Tales – and revised to provide an alternate paradigm for

women's existence. In her fables, women range from sensitive and clever to repressed and powerful. At times subtle and at other times bold – the fables portray the effects of gendered roles, male – domination and violence on women. This paper investigates the repeated social, economic and political abuse of women and their bodies, and the normalcy of clinical suppression that has been passed on to generations, under the garb of culture and tradition. It also provides reasons for women's eventual resistance against the hegemonic rules and retribution in the form of complete identity reversal.

*Keywords: feminist thought, wrongful representation, oppression, male – domination, violence, resistance*

Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* (year of publication) is a work of art that can be best described as a cataclysmic phenomenon that hastened the patriarchal regime into revisiting its surety of misogynistic classical texts. She questions the tradition of myth as a deterrent to women's role in society and in the words of Alicia Ostriker are handed down as the fundamental truths of human behaviour. While many feminists like Manju Kapur, Jasbir Jain, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal have toyed with the socio-political themes as a provocative feminist thought, Namjoshi too is feminist in her approach albeit, more reflective of brazen about the gender politics and identity misrepresentation. As a feminist, Namjoshi's agenda is echoed in C. Vijayashree's criticism where she states, "The issues raised in these fables are of course basic to the human condition: intimacy, loneliness, death, anger, ambition and desire; and these thread their way through this collection and are explored now with an eye for the comic, for the absurd, now with a sense of poignant sadness and longing" (Vijayasree 76). A by-product of Western political revolution, the Feminist movement caused a tentative shift in the Indian literary circuit. While the voice of the Indian feminist of the late 70s gradually shook away layers of rusted patriarchal and post colonial influences of culture on women, it has today superseded boundaries of race, class and

gender. Suniti Namjoshi not only questions the normative form of representation, but also reverses the role of women and gives them completely new identities.

The idea of revisiting a text and re-writing its language can be credited to Derrida and his theory of deconstruction based on which he had re-established an interpretation of Sassure. Namjoshi has explored Derrida's notion of 'a centre is not the centre' to experiment with the composition of language that had been used for centuries by male writers to draw upon a two-dimensional character of women. *Feminist Fables* is a didactic and satiric amalgamation of several familiar stories, with a completely humorous, feminist and most importantly multi-dimensional tactic. Women have either been represented as angelic, chaste, subservient, surrendering beings or ugly, vile, demonic and anomalous creatures. Mythological representations of women left no room for individual voices and worst of all limited the role of women like that of the stories which also turned out to be the reality of women's existence under the garb of tradition or culture for many years. When Feminists realized the deplorable conditions of women they became the 'Resisting Reader' (qtd.in Karen, 68) and this was effectively summed up by Adrienne Rich in *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision* who stresses the importance of re-writing the old stories, myths, legends and fables from the gynocentric point of view. This acts as a counter-discourse attempting to subvert the male-biased versions of the world. Re-vision, the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for us more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. This drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. Namjoshi too explores the parochial portrayal of women within the construct of a phallogocentric reality and reconstructs repressed female characters by using revisionary language.

The sources of Namjoshi's tales are ancient tales from Greek mythology, Anderson's fairytales, the famed collection of Indian parables like, *Panchatantra*, Christian myths,

Aesop's fables, etc. She illuminates the severe transgressions of socio-political pronouncements on the emotional, sexual and psychological well-being of women. Oftentimes writers relive their own lives in tales and the same can be said of Namjoshi.

She draws her representations from the subversive reality of a woman's status in society that is as predictable as it is deplorable. She refers to a story from the *Panchtantra* where Lord Vishnu in a state of abstraction grants a Brahmin's wish for a child; except that in this case he delivers him a daughter instead of a son. Like many typical Indian myths, the Brahmin is reincarnated as a woman who has eight boys as Lord Vishnu had promised her, "Next time around" (Namjoshi 1). In the case of the girl, Lord Vishnu sees himself land in a tricky situation when she asks for a "human status" (1). He appoints a committee to look into the matter since it was difficult to grant "human status" to females. In a wry fashion, bereft of sentimentality, Namjoshi attacks the gender hierarchy that has destroyed the very fundamental right of women. Since religion dictates a majority of culture and tradition in the everyday workings of a social model, she, blatantly attacks it for playing a pivotal role in the reduced status of women. While some might argue that a lot has changed since the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one just needs to examine the reaction of people to women attempting to pray at the Sabrimala Temple. A woman has been reduced to the natural functioning of the body and is not considered a human enough to pray to the very Gods that created her the way she is.

In fact, Namjoshi examines the female psyche that has been shaped by society's irrational and ridiculous demands based only on sex. Namjoshi makes it very clear that patriarchy has been formed to consistently demean and render the role of women inferior to those of men. For instance in her fable, "Heart" she portrays a woman typically engaged in a self-sacrificing, surrendering role of managing household chores, rearing children, serving her husband until she's left alone. With loneliness being her only companion she looks for respite in some pension money that she requests of the government, which turns her down since "the problem

was that she had no head and couldn't ask." (qtd.in.Ms.Collection,341). This story is a critique of society that places a secondary status on women and diminishes them into lesser beings.

Namjoshi uses sharp wit and acidic humour to demonstrate the differences in biological and cultural constructs that define the female sex. She revises the traditional telling of tales, such as, 'The Little Prince', 'The Princess,' 'The Lesson', 'The Hare and the Turtle', 'The Tale of Two Brothers' and makes allegorical representations to prove that nature and nurture are two different things.

The over-sensitive and fragile princess in the fable 'The Princess' sleeps on seven mattresses that is placed over a pea and is affected by the trials of other people. Her ill-health and grief may be psychosomatic, and Namjoshi points out the ridiculousness of her imminent death due to allergies and cold. An otherwise charming woman has fallen into the wiles of societal pressure to remain within a carefully created gender role that renders her underprepared for the harsh reality of the world outside.

The mark of a good woman is passive adherence to rules and social roles; another patriarchal construct. Namjoshi resists patriarchy and its imposition in 'The Lesson' which revolves around the life of a young girl who wants to imitate the naked emperor. Her mother reminds her that the closest thing a girl can get to an Emperor is marriage. The patriarchal regime demands a natural progression of its ideas from one generation to another which is not unsurprising as the mother passes on the need to "hold their tongues, particularly on the subject of the Emperor's clothes" (8). An acute observation made by Namjoshi here demonstrates the vicious vine of patriarchy that has spread to all echelons of society. The maid and the princess are on the same level where social diktats for women are charted out.

While the majority of our childhood has been sprinkled with fairytales, the ones where the handsome prince rescues the princess, marries her and lives happily ever after has given many people hope and disappointment in an oxymoronic twist of reality. Mythical characters of

Hansel and Gretel, Red Ridinghood, Little Miss Muffet, Jack of the Beanstalk, Cinderella etc. were epitomes of relationship goals until Namjoshi decided that the deception had to be revealed. The seemingly normal heterogeneous relationship between Cinderella and her prince is exposed to the reader as a myth that has been white-washed by patriarchal narrations to make women believe that marriage is the only way for a woman to be happy, no matter the cost. Namjoshi detroys the flaky cover of relationships by highlighting a conversation between the two characters,

The Prince says, “You married me for my money”.

Cinderella replies, “You married me for my looks”.

The Prince says: “But your looks will fade, whereas my money will last. Not a fair bargain” (118).

The princess decides to walk away and we are made to reckon with the idea of marriage being a bargain and a means to subordinate the woman, not the mutual understanding that it is often portrayed to be. She deplores “the disappointments, deprivation and anguish faced by women who deeply aspire for more space within the existing social structures” (Goel 180).

On the topic of marriage as a means of suppressing the woman, Namjoshi points out that the only way that this hegemony of male-domination could work would be the domestication of women. She rewrites the story of Bluebeard and his wife and even calls it ‘A Room of His Own’, which is reminiscent of one of the most important books on Feminism i.e. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of Her Own*. Just like Woolf who commented on the discrimination faced by women, despite their intellectual faculties, especially the role that marriage plays in challenging the position of women as intelligent and able persons, Namjoshi too revisits the fable to relay the consequences of resisting the man’s notion of himself. In response to his question, Bluebeard’s wife states, “I think you’re entitled to a room of your own” (64) which leads him to kill her, a crime which goes unpunished by the legal system.

Sexual and domestic violence is a norm in marriage which is further encouraged by the law turning a blind eye to the perpetrator. Abeda Sultan has observed that the tightly bound ropes of regressive patriarchal setup does not allow women to breathe or desire freely, in fact, it works best to the advantage of male dominance. She states:

“In this system, different kinds of violence may be used to control and subjugate women, such violence by men may even be considered legitimate and women are always routinely experienced by male violence. Male violence is systematically condoned and legitimated by the states refusal to intervene against it except in exceptional instance. Due to such violence (rape and other forms of sexual abuse, female foeticide, dowry murders, wife-beating) and the continued sense of insecurity that is instilled in women as a result keeps them bound to the home, economically exploited and socially suppressed” (Sultana 10).

Namjoshi partly blames women for being silent subordinates of merciless abuse. Her main aim of rewriting these fairytales is as symbolic as it is political, so that male cruelty and socially accepted violence can be addressed as major concerns from a humanitarian perspective. Her language reflects society's inability to curtail male supremacy and gender disparity. Her bare-faced portrayal of disproportionate rights of the sexes dominates her narrative. As per her observation, “The imbalance of power exists whether in the form of race, gender or poverty.” (Interview with GOMAG)

For centuries, women have borne the brunt of marital abuse; a secret that is shared by everyone but which is justified by promoting a sense of security that it brings. Like many feminists before her, Namjoshi addresses the problem of sexual exploitation in her story, ‘For Adrienne Rich- If She Would Like It.’ She investigates the depths of psychological warfare used by the heroine Scheharzade as she traverses through the uncertain depths of hell and beyond to placate the Caliph's lust. This arrangement that metaphorically kills her for a thousand nights and resurrects her as a sex slave, robs her of the remaining bits of individuality and identity. On



becoming queen she does not revel in her stature instead she donates her sister for the same position to the Caliph. The saga of sexual misconduct continues in the story, 'Further Adventures of the One-Eyed Monkey', where the King of Gods, Indra uses deception to rape the wife of a famous ascetic, who seeks retribution for this violation. Given the fact that justice is sought within the patriarchal realm, it is not unsurprising that the punishment is literally an eye-wash. The accurate testimony of the one-eyed monkey only leads to a purification ritual demanded by Lord Vishnu and a sacrificial stallion for the purpose of atonement. Be it seduction, or molestation or rape, ignorance or criticism of the woman is an accepted norm. The myths have promoted it, therefore the culture condones it.

Namjoshi's tale, 'In the Forest' is a re- representation of *Hansel and Gretel* where she dispels myths on strained female relationships and celebrates the concept of 'universal sisterhood' challenging the hegemonic chaos of male tale-telling. Reverting to the claim of women being divided into two categories – the powerful yet evil witch and the chaste, subjugated virgin – Namjoshi reminds us that non-conformists were exiled to the forests and branded as witches. When the young Gretel and Hansel enter the forest they are accosted by a witch who frightens Hansel to his mother's lap. Gretel remains. Hansel's flight culminates into resentment for female recognition of power. Freed from the boundaries of traditional tropes, she is psychologically liberated to make a decision that renders her fearless. The "wild witch's world" prepares Gretel for the reality of life in the harsh world and she "stands a better chance" (qtd.in Benson 207). Gretel is seen walking up bravely to the witch's house, and she lets her in. Namjoshi's message is loud and clear; women are more than fragile pieces of glass, capable of decision making and problem-solving.

As one of the earliest Indian women to declare herself a lesbian, Namjoshi's approach to lesbianism in the *Feminist Fables* can be summed up in Charlotte Bunch's words:

In our society, which defines all people and Institutions for the benefit of the rich, white male, the lesbian is in revolt. In revolt because she defines herself in terms of women and rejects the male definitions of how she should feel, act, look and live. To be a lesbian is to love oneself, woman in a culture that denigrates and despises women. The lesbian rejects male sexual or political domination; she defies his world, his social organization, his ideology, and his definition of her as inferior. Lesbianism puts women first while the society declares the male supreme. Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organized, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system (Qtd.in Crow 332).

When the term ‘queer’ came to light in the 1980s, everybody immediately denounced it as derogatory or peculiar. It was as Butler had once stated, a social construct, and she saw ‘Sex’ as natural a category as ‘Gender’. To Namjoshi too, lesbianism was no different and she echoes Butler’s thought, “Sex is a norm” (Osborne and Segal 1993 interview with Judith Butler). Her fables, such as ‘Thorn Rose’, ‘The Example,’ ‘Troglydyte,’ ‘The Sculptor’ etc. are concentrated, justified and exceptionally crafted to convey the normalcy and longevity of lesbianism. The unconscious feminine yearning transcends male rejection and translates to a deeper, meaningful relationship with a woman. The artist in ‘The Sculptor’ intends to create a man but she ends up “making a beautiful woman” (21). She destroys the myth that woman is solely created for the man, and is quite capable of understanding and projecting her innate feelings.

As a feminist, Namjoshi’s aim is to discard the myths that determine the course of a woman’s life from birth to death. Her pet peeve is the consistent uniformity with which the social structures of the world function. As a contemporary writer, she expands the boundaries of literature and seeks to overturn the latest commodification of female identity, made worse by capitalist regimes of the world. Her fables provide an environment for women to indulge in

a life that they have been deprived of at the social, economic and political level. Drawing emphatically from legends and fairytales she re-enacts the role of women while attributing to them, qualities of strength and intellect that were intentionally neglected. In her fables, women attempt and manage to reclaim their inner and outer spaces which were at the mercy of male storytellers for centuries. Her stories are created as a challenge to the falsified image presented to society via myths in the name of culture. The women here have discovered that there is more to their identity and not just in relation to the male. Namjoshi has brilliantly traced the three phases of Feminist theory as opined by Elaine Showalter - the 'feminine', the 'feminist', and the 'female'. Namjoshi has always attacked the political power play of the oppressor against the oppressed and is very clear that Feminism is an embodiment of just that. She might use humour and wit as a stimulus to promulgate the issue of female exploitation but she does not limit her scrutiny to the female realm. Her summation of feminist ideology is a scathing critique on the powers that oppress the voiceless. "See the feminist analysis applies equally to any underprivileged group or to the less powerful," she told the Hindu. "It only shows how the powerful work to keep status quo. Now, questioning that is important, necessary. If wanting a fairer, more decent society is being feminist, then I'm a feminist." (Interview with Kaushalya Anantham)

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